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ABSTRACT

Clearly, the United States cannot respond to every crisis, but what is meant precisely by the phrase "American interests"? How is the U.S. national interest defined and by whom? Does its definition affect the decision of how to respond to a crisis? This lesson deals with these complex and intertwined questions. By defining the national interest for themselves, students understand not only what their options are but the core values and assumptions that are the foundations of these options. Students working to understand the framework of decision making surrounding intervention will benefit from having articulated and tested their own definitions of the U.S. national interest against those of their classmates and against the decisions of policymakers. The student reading and assignment, in conjunction with the lesson's exercises and suggested discussion, are designed to begin the process of understanding the core assumptions of U.S. foreign policy. The lesson cites educational goals, presents a group exercise, provides questions for class discussion, and outlines a homework assignment. (BT)

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Defining the National Interest

A sample lesson on current international affairs from Choices Education Project

This lesson complements the curriculum unit from Choices Education Project titled *Keeping the Peace in the Age of Conflict: Debating the U.S. Role.*

Intro:
"CNN is not a compass for American interests. We cannot act on the urge, rooted as it is in good intentions, to respond to every crisis." –Anthony Lake, former national security adviser.

Clearly, the United States can not respond to every crisis, but what is meant precisely by the phrase, "American interests?" How is the U.S. national interest defined and by whom? Can the national interest change or be prioritized? Does its definition affect the decision of how to respond to a crisis?

These questions are complex and intertwined. By defining the national interest for themselves, students will begin to understand not only what their options are, but the core values and assumptions that are the foundations of those options. When deciding whether to intervene militarily to keep the peace, policy-makers need to take into account the full spectrum of national interests and concerns. Students working to understand the framework of decision-making surrounding intervention will benefit from having articulated and tested their own definitions of the U.S. national interest against those of their classmates and against the decisions of policy-makers.

The students' reading and assignment in conjunction with the following exercises and suggested discussion are designed to begin this process of understanding the core assumptions of U.S. foreign policy.

Goals:
Students will:

1. understand the concept of the national interest
2. understand the concept of vital national interest
3. have their own working definition of the national interest
4. be able to apply their definition to hypothetical and actual historical situations
5. understand that different definitions of the national interest lead to different responses to international crises and issues

Required Reading: Students should read and complete the short assignment on the handout "Defining the National Interest in Keeping the Peace" (pp. 4-5) prior to this class.

In the Classroom:
1. Group Exercise: Break the class into groups of about 5. Drawing from the lists created by each student outside of class, each group should spend 10 minutes creating one list in order of importance of 7-10 international issues that they think should be the concern the government of the United States. They should mark situations where they believe the United States should use force, often

refered to by the phrase "vital national interest." (Teachers might also choose to have students categorize interests where the U.S. might consider the use of force and interests that require non-military and diplomatic responses). They should attempt to reach a consensus on the term "national interest."

At the conclusion of the group exercise, each group should put its list and a definition on the board.

Suggestions: Define the phrase"vital national interest" before students begin the group exercise.A spokesperson from each group should go through the list, quickly highlighting items that need explanation, pointing out why items were ordered the way they were. If there was strong disagreement about the ordering of list, a brief synopsis of the argument might be informative.

2. **Class Discussion**: Case studies comparing the national interest in two countries.
If the teacher is using the unit *Keeping the Peace in the Age of Conflict: Debating the U.S. Role*, the students can read the case studies on Kosovo and Rwanda and then highlight and quickly list the shared characteristics of those two situations. Otherwise the teacher will summarize the cases for the students using the following table:

Similarities (Kosovo and Rwanda)

Ethnic conflict
Targeting of civilians
Military involvement of ruling government against minority
Human rights violations
Large refugee flows across borders
Danger of conflict spreading
Are there other similarities?

Differences

Kosovo	Rwanda
U.S. uses force	U.S. does not use force

Some questions for discussion:

1. Can the students think of other differences between Rwanda and Kosovo? What are they? (Note: These differences can be the starting point for discussions. The questions below are suggestions only and should be used at the teacher's disgression.)
2. Do the definitions of the U.S. national interest on the board offer any explanation for either the use of force in Kosovo or its not being used in Rwanda?
3. Do the definitions on the board provide the basis for making a decision about the use of force in Kosovo and Rwanda?
4. Are there any definitions on the board that would either demand intervention or that would prohibit it in the cases of Rwanda? If yes, what are the implications of this?
5. Are there any definitions on the board that leave the question of intervention or non- intervention open to interpretation? How should a policy resolve that dilemma? What responsibilities should policy-makers have in this case?
6. What happens when the question of intervention in the three other case-studies are tested by using these definitions of the national interest.
7. What other options and tools does the United States have to respond to international issues? How do they relate to the national interest?

8. What might cause the national interest change over time?
9. Are there factors other than the "national interest" that can influence decision-makers?

Suggestions: A large world map might be helpful and aid in discussion.

Recent Publications Related to Keeping the Peace and U.S. Intervention:

Thomas G. Weiss, "Opportunism and ambivalence in the U.S./U.N. Relationship," *The Providence Journal*, 7/2/99.

Edward N. Luttwak, "Give War a Chance," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August, 1999.

Homework Assignment

Defining the National Interest
In
Keeping the Peace

You are the new president of the United States. It is late January in the year 2001. After a long, difficult election campaign you have been inaugurated and moved into the White House. The parties and celebrations are over; now it is time to deal with your first international crisis.

An emergency meeting of your closest advisers is about to begin. There is fighting taking place in a country in Latin America. After years of civil war, ethnic fighting, widespread poverty, and nearly a million internally displaced people, a government crackdown on guerilla fighters has begun. CNN has been showing picture of civilians streaming across the border for the past four days. There have been reports of atrocities and the murders of thousands of unarmed men, women, and children by miliary forces. Human rights monitors, some from the United States, have been arrested or deported. There is concern about fighting spreading across borders. Neighboring countries are complaining that they cannot cope with the hundreds of thousands of refugees. The refugees will go hungry without international assistance.

There have been calls in the Congress by a handful of Republicans and Democrats to use the military to force an end to the conflict. Should you order the U.S. military to prepare? Are there other options available? You generally like to hear different points of view before you make your decisions. Your chief-of-staff has arranged for four presentations to be made. During the presentations, you take some notes, which are below:

1. The U.S. Ambassador to the UN: "We need to go to the UN Security Council. The UN is central to American and international security interests. If we do this, we will stake out the moral high ground and enhance respect for international law. The post-War transition, in which the UN will surely have an important humanitarian and political role, will be smoother."

2. A leading U.S. Senator: "Ending this tragedy is important to America's national interests. We must demonstrate our opposition to this aggression. The danger of inaction--of doing nothing--greatly exceeds the danger of action. There is danger of a larger war in which our allies in the area could be drawn in on opposite sides."

3. The National Security Adviser: "This conflict does not directly affect the interest of the United States. An unpleasant truth often overlooked in that although war is a great evil; it does have a great virtue: it can resolve political conflicts and lead to peace. We should let this burn itself out."

4. The Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights: "Until this Latin American country proves itself to be a country under law, it should be viewed as an outlaw nation. This means it is in our interest to threaten to cease all diplomatic relations. We should also provide a credible threat of military action for failure to stop widespread atrocities, murder, and the horrific violations of human rights."

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You address your advisers, "Thank you very much for your different points of view. But in reviewing my notes, I see that each of you refer to the U.S., American, or national interests. Before I make any decisions, I want to understand what exactly it is that you mean by national interest. Let's begin with the Ambassador. What do you mean when you say, 'American interests?"

* *

Clearly the term national interests may have different implications for each of the President's advisers. Although you would probably want to gather a great deal more information before making any decision in this hypothetical crisis, understanding the underlying assumptions of each point of view would help you make a decision. The following assignment is designed to help you begin to understand what is behind the phrase, "the national interest," and to help you formulate your own definition of it as well.

Your Assignment:

1. In preparation for class, make a list of what you think the 5-7 most important international issues are for the U.S. government. The list should include all international issues and not just ones applicable to the hypothetical crisis above. For example, your list might include stability in Russia or the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Please them in order of importance. Be prepared to explain your choices in class.

2. Using your list, write *your* definition of "national interest."

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